



# **Find Your Fire**

**endversed**

## Find Your Fire by endversed

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**Summary:**

Richie Tozier meets a cute firecracker of a guy when he accidentally sets off the fire alarm in his apartment.

It's just too bad that said guy has got a boyfriend - doesn't he?

## Find Your Fire

### Author's Note:

All the characters included in this story are 21 + - rated T for language, sexual humour, and allusions to actual sex.

*I'm going to quit my fucking job*, Richie thinks, not for the first time, as he opens the door to his apartment. The digital clock on the oven blinks **04:03** evilly at him as he throws his keys into the pot by the door (or, at least attempts to; they actually end up on the floor, but he doesn't pick them up – that's a problem for Tomorrow Richie). He shrugs his jacket off and tosses it onto the couch, walking toward his evil oven and its evil clock. He's exhausted, but he's starving, and he knows he won't be able to sleep until his belly is fuller than its current rumbling state.

He rummages around in the freezer – which desperately needs re-filling, so he makes a mental note to badger Bev into going grocery shopping soon – until he finds what he's looking for: pizza rolls.

"I love you, baby," he says, kissing the icy packet lovingly. He'd like to be able to say that talking to inanimate objects was a state induced by his overly tired mind, but it would be a lie, as he still does it even after a good ten hour rest. "You're gonna make me feel so good soon."

The pizza rolls, shockingly, do not return his affection.

He flips his oven on, not bothering to pre-heat, and rips the cardboard apart messily, tipping the whole lot onto an oven tray and shoving it in. He doesn't bother setting a timer – he's heard 'beep beep' enough times in his life that he's happy to avoid the opportunity wherever possible.

Once the cooking has been set in motion, he rounds the corner of their hallway to take a peek at Bev's bedroom door. It's open, and the lights are off inside, so he assumes she's staying the night at her boyfriend Ben's.

*Pity, he thinks. Woulda been nice to have someone around to annoy.*

He travels back into their living room and flops down onto their old, torn up couch that has definitely seen better days. Despite this, at this moment in time it is still absolutely the most fucking comfortable thing Richie has ever experienced in his twenty-one years of life.

He can feel his body starting to relax, his limbs becoming sleep heavy as he sinks further into the cushions. He takes his glasses off and chucks them onto the coffee table at his shins, rubbing at the bridge of his nose with two pinched fingers. His eyes begin to droop as his head flops backwards.

*Just five minutes*, he thinks, succumbing to the deep-set fatigue in his bones.

‘Famous last words’ has never been a more apt turn of phrase.

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*Beep.*

*Beep Beep.*

“Five more minutes,” Richie grumbles.

*Beep Beep Beep Beep Beep.*

“I said five more minutes, Bev, *fuck.*”

Richie opens his eyes, ready to glare at Bev until she fucks off, leaves him in *peace*, to *sleep*. She knows he’d been working at the bar until ridiculous o-fucking-clock, so why the *fuck* is she trying to wake him up?

Except when he opens his eyes, he can’t see Bev.

He can’t see anything, actually, because –

“Oh, fuck,” he chokes. *Smoke.*

It all comes back to him in a rush of weary-tinged memories. Coming home. Kissing his pizza rolls before he put them in the oven. Falling the fuck to sleep whilst said pizza rolls were still cooking.

The beeping he'd assumed to be Bev was actually the smoke alarm, loud and invasive, ringing in his ears. He blindly grabs in front of himself for his glasses, shoving them onto his face before high-tailing it the *fuck* out of his apartment.

The halls are swarming with residents woken up by the alarm, all rushing to vacate. Richie folds himself into the bunch, moving quickly away from the smoke rolling out of his apartment door. As he reaches the building's front door, he can hear approaching sirens, and as he walks through it and outside into the cold October air, he can see a fire engine pulling up.

The chatter from the residents huddled outside is panicked, almost everyone still in their pyjamas, what with it being before five, and all. The fire brigade rush into the building, someone seeming to have already told them the source of the smoke. Richie meanders his way to the centre of the heard, pulling his phone out of his jacket pocket and firing off a quick text to Bev.

*I set the apartment on fire lol :)*

He laughs to himself, excited already for the alarmed and angry call he'll receive from her when she wakes up at Ben's place in a few hours.

“Oh, at least *that* guy can fucking laugh about this!”

Richie grins, turning towards the source of that shrill exclamation. He figures out easily enough that it has come from a guy standing near him, as said guy is openly and unabashedly staring at him, glaring daggers. This guy is wearing the most ridiculous, *tiny* short-shorts Richie has ever seen, and a threadbare sweater – no jacket. He is, unsurprisingly, visibly shivering in the freezing wind that whips around them.

Richie gives him a once over, immediately liking what he sees – this guy is Richie's type down to a T.

He's short, in an immediately obvious kind of way. Richie is taller than most, standing at 6'2", but this guy looks like he can't be any bigger than 5'4", maybe 5'5" at a push. He has short, fluffy brown hair that's getting whisked around by the breeze, and, honestly? The damn cutest face Richie has ever laid eyes on.

Even with that death glare, this guy is getting superlatives out of Richie.

"You talking about me, cutie?" Richie asks, ambling over.

"Yeah, but I wasn't talking *to* you," Cutie bites out, and Richie's grin gets even wider. "So you can fuck off now."

Richie only notices the two guys standing with this cutie when one of them elbows him.

"D-don't be rude," Elbow Guy says, and then shoots an apologetic look at Richie. "S-sorry, he's just c-c-cold."

Richie nods solemnly. "I can understand why," he empathises. "Those shorts would look at home in a whorehouse, luring the customers in."

Cutie's jaw drops, while the two people he's with – Elbow Guy and Curly Hair – hide their laughter terribly.

"Who the fuck do you think you are, talking to people like that?" Cutie snaps.

"I'm Richie Tozier, pleasure to make your acquaintance," Richie introduces, using his British voice. He holds his hand out for a handshake, but Cutie just stares at Richie's palm like it's covered in dog shit. Richie is unperturbed, turning it into a royal curtsy easily. "And what's your name, cutie?"

Cutie's face screws up in clear irritation, but instead of responding, he just turns on the balls of his feet so that he's facing away from Richie. Richie misses that adorable face already. Curly Hair rolls his eyes when Cutie tugs at his arm, but turns around with him anyway.

“Sorry about h-him,” Elbow Guy says. “I p-promise he’s not u-usually this rude.”

Richie hears Cutie huff. “I don’t think I believe that for a second,” Richie replies, and Elbow Guy laughs sheepishly. “But I’ll forgive all if you give me Cutie’s name.”

“Do *not* tell that asswipe my name, Bill,” Cutie warns, still facing the other way.

Elbow Guy – Bill – offers Richie another sheepish smile. “I’d ra-rather take your a-anger than his.” Bill shrugs, and yeah, Richie can totally understand that. “But I-I’m Bill and th-that’s Stan.” Stan throws his hand up in the air in a small wave without turning around. “S-s-sucks that we’re out h-here, right? I w-wonder whose fault it was.”

“Oh. It was my fault,” Richie says loudly, purely to get a reaction. “I fell asleep with food in the oven.”

He gets exactly what he wants: Cutie spins back around, face fucking *twisted* in rage.

Richie absolutely adores it.

“It was you?” Cutie starts, terrifyingly calm and quiet. “You’re the reason we’re out in the *freezing cold* in the middle of *October*? Are you a fucking *moron*?”

“Yup,” Richie agrees easily, beaming. Cutie’s face is so red; it looks like his head might explode. “Yup, to all of the above.”

“Holy *fuck*,” Cutie exclaims. “Are you the dumbest fucking person in the *world*?”

“You c-c-could have really go-got yourself hurt, man,” Bill worries.

Cutie rolls his eyes at his friend. “Oh, fuck off, Big Bill, quit being so fucking nice.”

“You want my jacket, cutie?” Richie offers, already beginning to shrug it off. The cold air hitting his exposed biceps makes him regret it pretty much instantly, but he knows it’ll be worth it if Cutie

decides to actually take him up on his offer. "It'll warm you up."

"I don't want your gross jacket, it's probably drenched in sweat and germs," Cutie spits. "I want to be *in bed*."

"Oh, well, it's a bit forward of you, cutie, but sure," Richie retorts, putting his jacket back into place, "you can come in my bed, if you want." He waggles his eyebrows ridiculously. "In more ways than one, if you know what I mean."

Cutie opens his mouth, looking about ready to *scream*, jaw twitching madly, but is halted by a fireman yelling over the general hubbub of the crowd.

"Okay, it's fine to go in now, people, you can make your ways back inside. We just need to speak to whoever lives in apartment twenty-three."

The crowd begin to immediately disperse, Cutie shooting off like a bullet the second he heard they had the all clear to re-enter, sparing one last scowl for Richie before he's into the throngs. Bill follows close behind him, and Stan is about to follow before Richie stops him.

"Hey, Stan," he calls out, stopping Stan in his tracks. This Stan guy turns towards him, looking suspicious with a frown on his face. "Will you tell me cutie's name?"

Stan's frown deepens. "No," he says simply. "It wouldn't be worth the hassle."

"Please, man," Richie begs, hands clasped in front of his chest in the universal gesture. He vaguely contemplates getting down on both knees, really going for it, but decides against it as the ground is wet and his jeans have holes in the knees. "I promise I won't tell him it was you. I'll say I, um. I'll say I got it from stealing his mail, or something!"

Stan raises an eyebrow. "Fine," he agrees after a second, and Richie fist pumps – both mentally and physically. "But only to stop you actually going through our fucking mail. His name is Eddie."

"Eddie," Richie breathes, beaming. "Eds. I like it. Cute li'l Eddie

Spaghetti.”

“He won’t like either of those nicknames,” Stan says, though amusement laces his tone.

“That’s never stopped me before,” Richie says with a grin, then, “I gotta go speak to the nice firemen now about what a moron I am. Kiss ol’ Spaghetti Head goodnight for me, yeah?”

“Goodnight? It’s five in the morning,” Stan mutters, but Richie’s already walking away.

*Huh*, he thinks, preparing himself to nod apologetically along with whatever the firemen berate him with. *Maybe it was worth almost dying.*

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Richie’s alarm goes off at seven, reminding him that he’s got a class in an hour and a half. He ignores that reminder completely by turning his alarm off straight away and promptly falling back to sleep.

When he finally does wake up, it’s just gone midday and the smell of smoke still permeates the apartment, making him want to hold his breath. He groans, rolling over on his mattress so that he can grab his phone from the bedside table. He taps the home button and notes eighteen missed calls and innumerable texts threatening to castrate him from Bev.

Then, as if on cue, he hears the front door slam.

“Richard Tozier!” she yells, which is how he knows she’s not *really* mad – when she’s really angry, she’s quieter than a dormouse. “Get your useless fuckin’ ass out here!”

Richie groans but complies, grabbing a shirt from the floor beside his bed to slip on before he reluctantly leaves the warmth of his blankets.

He pads into the living room and finds Bev standing there, hands on her hips with a look of agitation on her face.

“What up, Marsh,” Richie greets sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “How’s Ben?”

“He’s my dream man,” Bev answers, stalking towards him with her chipped nail polish finger pointing at him. “Unlike *you*.”

Richie steps back slightly. “Well, that’s why *we’re* not dating.”

“Ew,” Bev stays, scrunching up her nose. “Gross, no. *We’re* not dating because you’re like my brother, dipshit.” She reaches out and grabs Richie’s forearm, pulling him through to the small kitchen that’s attached to their living room. The smell of burning is even stronger at this close range. “I leave you for *one night*, Richie.”

“I am sorry,” he says, because despite what people say about him, he does know when he needs to be contrite. “It was an honest to God accident, I was starving when I got in so I put them in to cook, but I was *so tired* that as soon as I sat down, I fell asleep.”

“Did you not eat before going to work again?”

Richie shrugs. “I just... forgot. You know how I get.”

She does, which is why she frowns and wraps an arm around his waist instead of continuing to chew him out.

In most cases of ADHD, the symptoms lessen, sometimes even disappearing, when the person reaches adulthood. Richie has not found this to be the case so far. Sure, he *is* less hyperactive than he was when he was a kid, but he’s still forgetful, and speaks without thinking, often interrupting others because the urge to get the words in his brain out into the open is just too damn strong. He still struggles to focus on tasks, always starting new ones before ever getting around to finishing the old ones. He still fidgets constantly without realising he’s doing it.

He thinks that he still has it as badly as he does now because it went untreated for so long in his youth.

“The smell will go and we can clean the oven out tonight,” Bev says, pressing her face against his chest. He wraps his arms around her shoulders and presses his face into her curling hair. “And you’re not hurt, which is the main thing.”

“Thanks, Bev,” Richie mumbles, genuine. He kisses the crown of her head. “Plus, one good thing came out of it.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bev replies, pulling out of their embrace and tugging him over so that they can sit on the couch. As Richie takes his seat, she immediately swings her legs up and puts her socked feet into his lap. He allows it. “And what’s that?”

Richie smirks. “I met a cute boy.”

Bev claps her hands together, grinning. “Do *tell*, Rich.”

“The li'l darlin' is called Eddie,” Richie breathes, putting on his Southern Belle voice. “He lives right in this here buildin'!” He returns to his normal voice, still grinning ear to ear, to say, “And he fucking *hates* me, Bev.”

“Only you would find that endearing, Trashmouth,” she laughs. “Why does he hate you?”

“Half because I set the fire alarm off at five in the morning,” Richie explains, “and half because I maybe, *possibly*, just a smidgeon, insinuated that he looked like a prostitute.”

Bev gapes. “Fuck’s *sake*, Trashmouth, have a fucking day off! How the fuck do you *ever* get laid?”

“My dashing good looks, obviously. Well, that and my huge di –“

“Beep beep, Richie,” she says, holding her hand in front of his face.

“Fuck, please no more beeps,” he implores, twining their fingers together and glancing up towards the apartment’s recently abused smoke alarm. “I’ve had more than enough for one day.”

She smiles softly at him and doesn’t mention it again, not even when they’re scrubbing the oven clean together. She’s good like that, his

Bev.

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The working week passes and the smell in their apartment begins to dissipate, even if only a little bit. News had travelled fast around the building that the cause of the commotion that chilly morning on Monday was Richie, so he's getting used to receiving glares from every neighbour he passes in the halls. He's probably not helping the situation much by grinning inanely and obtusely at all of their scowls.

It's Friday afternoon and Richie is returning home after attending *all* of his classes for that day – impressive, he knows – when he bumps into the only scowling neighbour he's actually wanted to see.

"Eds!" he yells excitedly, catching Eddie as he climbs the staircase. "Long time no see, cutie!"

Eddie has stopped his motion, looking absolutely reluctant to do so, and has turned to face Richie. Richie bounds up the stairs two at a time until he's only one step below.

"How do you know my name?" he asks, then quickly follows it with, "Not that that's my fucking name. *Eddie*. Not Eds."

Richie waves his hand vaguely. "Not important, Eddie Spaghetti. What is important is that I was able to use that name to call out for you, my fair maiden, which is the reason we're engaging in this lovely conversation right now."

Eddie stares at him for a second, frowning. "Why were you so desperate to learn my name if you aren't even going to *use it*?"

"I am using it," Richie counters. "I'm just *bettering* it. Everybody loves a nickname."

"I don't."

“Isn’t Eddie a nickname?”

Eddie’s frown grows more severe. “I don’t like *your* choice of nicknames. And I have absolutely no idea why I’m still talking to you.”

He turns to leave, but Richie’s not having that.

“C’mon, cutie,” he says, following closely behind as Eddie marches up the stairs. “Talking to me can’t be *that* painful.”

Eddie snorts. “You should try recording yourself sometime, maybe then you’ll understand why people are the way they are toward you.”

“You wound me, Edwin,” Richie says, clutching at his heart.

“Jesus Christ, why would you go to Edwin before Edward, *clearly* it’s Edward.”

“Sorry, Eduardo.”

Richie can’t be absolutely sure; from where he’s following behind Eddie he can only see the bottom left corner of his face. But he’s pretty sure, well, maybe pretty sure, that he just saw Eddie’s lips tug up in a smile, before immediately being forced back into a straight line.

“Did you actually want something, or are you just following me for shits and giggles?” Eddie demands, coming to a stop in front of a door that reads 15. “Because I’m kinda meant to be studying right now, so.”

“Studying on a Friday?” Richie pulls a horrified face. “Jeez, someone really needs to show you how to have a good time. And I will selflessly volunteer myself for that duty.” Eddie just stares at him, unimpressed. “Okay, okay. I’ll go. But I did just want to say... sorry for being a bit of a douche last week. I have a tendency to speak before I think, and it gets even worse when I’m tired, so... I’m sorry.”

Eddie blinks, clearly at a bit of a loss.

“Oh,” he breathes eventually. “Well. Well, thanks. I’m sorry, too, for

– for being so harsh. I can be a little bitchy sometimes and it gets worse when I'm, well. When I'm woken up by a fire alarm, forced to stand in the freezing cold in my pyjamas, and then have to go to my morning classes absolutely exhausted as a result."

Richie grins. "They *were* very cute pyjamas. You absolutely rock those short-shorts, cutie."

"Fuck off," Eddie says, but he's biting his lip in a clear attempt to keep a smile off his face. "Like, literally fuck off, I want to go inside my apartment."

"You not gonna invite me in for a cup of coffee?" Richie asks, sounding offended as he waggles his eyebrows. "After I walked you all the way to your door?"

Eddie doesn't bother hiding it this time, just openly grins and rolls his eyes. He turns his key in the door and opens it, using one hand to wave and then push Richie away slightly.

"Goodbye, Richie," he says.

"Adios, mi amor."

Eddie slams the door in his face, but Richie still counts it as a win.

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There have been only three occasions in the six months of Richie's occupancy in his current apartment where he has regretted their decision to move there.

The first time was when he realised that his favourite Chinese place didn't deliver this far, as it was out of the catchment area, leaving him only with the option to *collect* – and there's not a chance in hell that his lazy ass was doing *that*. He'd thrown a fit at Bev and demanded that they *had* to move. She'd placated him with a couple of menus from new places, and he'd found somewhere just as good

within a week.

The second time was when he thought the place was haunted. He'd been woken up at ass o'clock by a loud *bang*, followed by some eerie moaning. He'd been all ready to call the police, the news, a fucking exorcist. But when he'd gone to investigate, he'd actually found Bev and Ben on the sofa, doing – well. He can't really blame that one on the apartment, though, as those two have been waking him up with their shenanigans ever since they got together two years ago.

The third time is today, bright and early on a Monday morning; before seven. He is woken up to the sound of banging, and he initially assumes it's Bev and Ben (again). But when the banging is followed by more banging and no groaning or moaning, he quickly realises it's not coming from *inside* the apartment, but rather above it.

Plaster dust falls from the ceiling and across his face as he groggily brings himself into the waking world. He grimaces; opening his eyes and seeing the bottle of water on his dresser wobble precariously. He deduces easily enough that it's coming from the apartment above (he's a regular Sherlock Holmes, he knows) and that they must be moving furniture around, or sacrificing a heavy virgin to Satan himself – or something else to that effect.

He checks the clock on his phone and realises it's ten minutes before his morning alarm is even due to go off. This being the same alarm he'd happily ignored last week, mere hours after he nearly caught the whole building on fire. It's the alarm that tells him he's got a class to haul his ass out of bed for; the class he hasn't attended even once so far this semester. Honestly, he's not sure he why he chose such an early morning one; you'd have thought he'd learned his lesson about him and early morning excavations by now.

The noises from above don't seem like they're going to be going anywhere anytime soon, so he decides, *fuck it* – there's a first time for everything! He gets himself out of bed, into the shower, and dressed ready to go. He collects the notes he's been taking and puts them into his messenger bag (just because he's not been attending physically, doesn't mean he's not been catching up online) and leaves his apartment to make his way onto campus.

He leaves early, and so should make it to class with thirty minutes to spare. But this is Richie, who gets distracted by dogs he passes on the street and sits down on a park bench *en route* so he can observe the morning joggers, so he actually doesn't make it to class until fifteen minutes after it's due to start.

Luckily, the professor doesn't seem to be around yet as he literally stumbles into the class fifteen minutes late with Starbucks. He's not been before, so as he scans the room for somewhere to sit, he doesn't recognise any of the faces.

Oh, wait, maybe he recognises one.

"Eds, my boy!" he yells, spotting the cutie sitting a few rows from the back. Eddie looks up at the exclamation, face a picture of surprise at first, but quickly morphing into one of irritation when he realises who's called for him. Richie ambles over and drops his stuff on the empty table beside Eddie. "This seat taken?"

"Yes," Eddie grits out, shuffling his chair away from Richie. "By literally anyone but you. And that's still not my fucking name."

Richie shrugs, ignoring Eddie's protestation. "Eh, you snooze you lose."

He plops himself down into the seat, taking out his pen (pink, furry at the top) and his notebook. He places them on the table and then turns to Eddie, chin rested against his palm as he props his arm up on the table.

"Are you stalking me?" Eddie asks, eyes narrowed.

"Eds, I'm appalled at the accusation! Why would you ask that?"

Eddie huffs. "Because this class has been going since September and I've not seen you here once."

"Well, I've usually got better things to be doing with my time," Richie says breezily. "Like your mom, for example."

Eddie's mouth turns into a tight little line and he doesn't deign to reply. Seconds later, their tutor rushes into the room apologising for

her tardiness, and the lesson begins.

Ten minutes pass and Richie is on his best behaviour – honest! He’s not talking, not fidgeting; just studiously taking notes and maybe, occasionally, stealing quick glances to his right so he can watch Eddie, who has his pink tongue caught between his teeth, poking out of his mouth a little. His head is tilted ever so slightly and he’s taking notes in some of the neatest handwriting Richie has ever seen. Richie is surprised when Eddie is the one to interrupt their silence first.

“Can you *stop that*,” Eddie demands, hissed under his breath.

“Stop what, Spaghetti Head?”

“*Breathing*,” Eddie snaps. “Why the fuck do you breathe so loudly?”

“I’ll hold my breath if you promise to give me the kiss of life when I pass out,” Richie stage-whispers, grinning. “Just don’t leave me hanging so long I go brain-dead.”

Eddie scoffs. “Something tells me you’re already halfway there.”

“Yowza, Eddie Spaghetti gets in a good one! Why you gotta be so mean to me, cutie?” He affects his Southern Belle drawl again. “All I’s ever done is love you, sugar!”

“Shut up,” Eddie whispers. “I actually want to graduate this year, so.”

Richie leans towards Eddie slightly, dropping his voice huskily. “I’m not the one who spoke first, my darling Edwin. Something tells me you’re struggling to resist the natural charisma and allure of Richie Tozier, but don’t worry, that just means you’re human.” Richie pauses for a second. “Hey, what’s your surname? I need to know for when I’m doodling our names in hearts later.”

“If I tell you, will you shut up?” Eddie implores.

“Sure,” Richie agrees, then under his breath, “for a little while, at least.”

Eddie huffs again, but reaches over Richie so that he can write directly onto Richie’s notebook. He writes in the margin at the top,

same neat handwriting as before: *Eddie Kaspbrak*.

He underlines 'Eddie' six times.

"Now *shut up*," Eddie reiterates, but he kind of looks like he's smiling.

Richie drags two pinched fingers across his mouth to indicate that his lips are sealed, and goes back to focusing on the lesson at hand.

They actually manage to get through the rest of the class without saying another word to each other, much to Richie's dismay. He makes up for the quiet by occasionally knocking his elbow against Eddie's, just so he can see the cute agitation playing across Eddie's face. When the class is over, Richie packs up as fast as he can so he can follow Eddie into the hallway and catch him before he runs off.

"Yo, Kaspbrak, you wanna go grab some breakfast?" Richie asks.

"Not with you," Eddie replies, but Richie's kind of adept at reading him now and can tell he doesn't actually feel as harshly about it as he's trying to convey. "I've got another class now."

"Rain check then, baby."

"I'm not your baby." Eddie rolls his eyes and shoulders his rucksack a little farther up onto his side. "How do you have *any* friends if you're like this with them all the time?"

Richie winks. "Cutie, no-one else gets to experience Richie Tozier in the same way you do."

Eddie tries to hide it, but Richie delights in the pink tinge that rises on Eddie's cheek.

*Cute, cute, cute*, he thinks.

"Whatever. I'll see you around, Tozier."

He turns and begins walking away, so Richie calls out to his retreating back: "I'm growing on you, Eds, just admit it!"

"Yeah, like fucking mold!" Eddie retorts quickly, before turning out

of Richie's line of sight.

Richie decides his Monday morning class is now a hell of a lot more worth getting up for.

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Richie's fixation on Eddie does the polar opposite of diminishing over the ensuing weeks; his adoration for the guy grows and grows with each of Eddie's snarky replies, with each of his crappily hidden smiles at Richie's jokes, with each of his ridiculous outfits (seriously, the guy sometimes wears a *fanny pack*, for fuck's sake). Richie is not at all used to something, *someone*, holding his attention for so long. He's had flings, sure, but that's absolutely all they ever were – he's never wanted anything further than a night or two with any one person. He's always considered Bev to be his One, capital-O, in a fully platonic way, and he's not thought much into romantic pursuits during his life.

He thinks about romancing Eddie Kaspbrak a lot.

Richie thinks about dating him; kissing him in the rain and the snow and the sun. He thinks about holding Eddie's tiny, cute hand as they walk around a lake together, about introducing Eddie to Bev and revelling in how they would totally team up to roast him, about taking Eddie out to eat and paying for everything, like he's seen in the movies.

He thinks that last notion is probably the most achievable of the bunch, in the short-term. But first thing's first: he's got to get Eddie to agree to eat with him.

"Breakfast, Eddie Spaghetti?" Richie asks as they pack up after their shared Monday morning class, just like he has every week for the past three. Eddie has always shot him down, usually with a straight up 'no', followed by a softer 'you know I have another class now'. Richie does know this, but when Eddie opens his mouth to spout off

his routine line, Richie cuts him off. “C’mon, Eds. Missing one class won’t kill you. You can catch up online; I’ll help! Just come eat some damn pancakes with me, I’m begging ya.”

Eddie doesn’t say anything for a minute. He stands with his rucksack clutched against his chest, bottom lip caught between his teeth and his eyes darting from Richie’s face to the classroom door and then back again. Richie feels his shoulders begin to deflate already, knowing his pleading hasn’t worked.

But then –

“Okay,” Eddie says, softly, surprisingly. Richie blinks as Eddie secures his bag on his back. “Where?”

Richie falters slightly, not ever expecting to actually get this far. He chokes on a few words, not knowing what to say, blinking a little crazily. His shit brain is screaming at him to suggest breakfast in bed with a wink, but there’s no chance he’s losing Eddie’s agreement by being unnecessarily crude. At least not at such an early stage.

“I, um, I know a place. Ten minute walk away,” he responds eventually.

Eddie just nods, moving to exit the room. Richie follows him, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste, and catches up to him as they navigate their way through the corridor. They don’t say anything for a while, walking in companionable, if not a little awkward, silence. After five minutes, when they’re walking in the cold, fresh air, Eddie nudges Richie in the side with his elbow.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asks, clearly amused if the smile playing at his lips is anything to go by. “I think this is the longest you’ve gone without speaking since I’ve known you.”

Richie chuckles, glancing sideways so he can spy the adorable, cold-induced pinkness to Eddie’s cheeks. “And now you’ve ruined it, Eds.” He puts on a ridiculous DJ Khaled impersonation. “Congratulations, you played yourself.”

Eddie snorts. “You’re like a walking fucking meme, Tozier.”

“That is damn near the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me, cutie.” Richie reaches out and ruffles Eddie’s hair, earning him a quick smack away and a scowl from Eddie. Richie grins regardless and uses his recently smacked hand to adjust Eddie’s scarf around his neck, covering more of the exposed skin. “You look cold.”

“Yeah, well,” Eddie replies, even more pink spread across his face now, “it’s November, so.”

“If only it were summer, maybe then I’d be able to see you in those short-shorts again.” Eddie flips him off instead of replying, making Richie laugh, loud and genuine. “This is us, anyway.”

Richie wraps a hand around Eddie’s wrist to tug him to a stop, and because Eddie doesn’t immediately push him away, he doesn’t let go as they walk through the double door entrance and into the inviting warmth of the diner. Richie smiles at the hostess and holds up two fingers, still tugging Eddie along with him as they walk over to their booth. Eddie gently removes his wrist from Richie’s fingers as he takes a seat on one side of the booth. Richie considers being annoying and sitting beside him, but decides against it and takes the seat opposite him instead.

The hostess leaves them with a smile and two menus. Eddie picks his up and begins to peruse, the cutest little furrow between his brows. Richie doesn’t bother looking at his; he’s been here enough times to already know what he’s going for, so he instead simply hooks his right ankle over his knee and leans back, arms stretched out over the expanse of his seat.

“You come here a lot?” Eddie asks, not looking up from his menu.

“Is that a pick-up line, Kaspbrak?”

“Never in a million years, Tozier,” Eddie retorts, rolling his eyes. Richie determinedly ignores the way that shoot-down makes his heart feel like it’s constricting, ever so slightly. “I just mean because you’re not even looking at the menu.”

Richie shrugs. “Yeah, I come here pretty often with Bev. The pancakes are good, I promise ya.”

"You talk about Bev a lot," Eddie says, folding his menu and beginning to fiddle with the napkin on the table in front of him. "Is she a good friend of yours?"

"The *best*," Richie replies earnestly. "We grew up together. I don't think I'd have survived my childhood without her. She's my rock." He smiles ruefully. "She's like the sister I never had. And, if you knew my parents, you'd be as grateful as I am that they didn't procreate more than once."

The waitress comes over then, taking their orders – Richie has pancakes and a black coffee, Eddie has eggs benedict with salmon and a peppermint tea. Richie is all set to rib Eddie on his old lady choices as soon as the waitress had scooped up their menus and walked away, but Eddie starts talking again before he can.

"My family life was pretty shitty, too," he admits quietly. He's still fidgeting with his napkin, fingers ripping shreds off, corner to corner. He looks like he wants to elaborate, mouth opening and closing around half-formed words. After a while, he shakes his head, more to himself than anything else, and looks Richie in the eye. "So, what's your major?"

Richie smirks. "Take a wild guess," he goads, and when Eddie just looks at him, impatiently disapproving, he continues, "Drama."

Eddie grins widely, rolling his eyes. "You're right, I could've guessed that. You're probably the most dramatic person I have ever met in my life."

"Damn, cutie, you're full of compliments today!" The waitress reappears with their food and drinks, placing each plate and cup in front of their respective owners. Richie picks up his knife and fork and begins to tuck in, still continuing the conversation, but careful not to talk with his mouth full at any point – he gets the feeling that'd be a big no-no for Eddie. "So what's yours? And how's your food?"

"Psychology. And it's good – thank you."

"Good, I'm glad," Richie says, genuinely happy that Eddie seems to

be enjoying his food – he had picked this place for them, after all, and he is trying to impress the guy. “Psychology’s interesting – what inspired you to choose that?”

Eddie stares down at his, seemingly fascinating, plate. “Just – just interested in it, I guess.” Richie’s not one to push or pry, content enough to keep his own baggage a secret where possible, so he leaves it and continues eating. The silence leaves his mind to wander for a few moments, and he’s shocked out of his reverie by Eddie’s irritated *humph* and the clattering of his cutlery against his plate. “You are so fucking annoying, Tozier, do you know that? I swear to *shit*, it’s like you’re doing it on purpose to get a rise out of me.”

Richie blinks, honestly confused. “Huh? What was I doing?”

Eddie’s eyes look like they’re going to bug out of his head. “Are you shitting me?” When Richie continues to look lost, Eddie grits his teeth. “You didn’t notice that you were humming the same line from Careless Whisper over and over and fucking *over* again? All whilst also rapping your knuckles against the table top *incessantly*?”

Richie looks down at his fisted hand resting on the table. He quickly moves it so that it sits in his lap instead. No, he hadn’t noticed he was doing either of those things.

“Sorry,” he finds himself saying, almost against his own volition. “I have ADHD. It didn’t get treated as a kid so it’s kinda stuck with me. My parents were alcoholics who didn’t pay me any mind, so. I didn’t realise I was doing it.”

He has absolutely no idea why he said that. He’s not usually forthcoming with information about himself. He’s *especially* not forthcoming with the reason for his constant spacing, or his habitual fidgeting, or any of his other ADHD symptoms. He’s never been one to excuse himself – if someone finds him annoying, that’s their problem.

Eddie has openly told Richie on numerous occasions that he finds him annoying, but this is the first time it’s been because of his symptoms and not just some crass joke or flirtation Richie has thrown his way. It hurts Richie in a way he wishes it didn’t; hurts him in the

way it reminds him of when his mother would drunkenly yell at him for not being the perfect daughter she'd always wanted, for being too loud and vulgar and boyish.

"Oh," Eddie mumbles.

"Hey, just think: if it's annoying to be around for the length of one meal, just imagine how annoying it is to live with it. Ha." Richie's laugh is devoid of any humour, and when he chances a glance at Eddie's face, he notices the same of Eddie's expression. "Sorry, anyway."

Eddie shakes his head quickly and vigorously. "No, *no*," he says forcefully. "Don't say sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you annoying."

Richie snorts. "Which time?" he asks, but he's teasing. Eddie still looks guilty as all hell, so Richie reaches across the table to rest his hand on Eddie's forearm. "Hey, don't worry about it, man. You didn't know."

"I shouldn't have to *know* to stop myself from being nasty to people for no reason," Eddie mutters, then louder, "And please don't console me, it'll only make me feel worse."

"Maybe that's what I'm going for," Richie offers, still not removing his hand. He sees a small tug at the corner of Eddie's lips, like one quarter of a smile. "I mean, honestly... you were kind of a dick, so."

One quarter turns into a whole. "I was," Eddie concurs easily. "Well, I *am*, to be honest. You'll learn that about me the more you get to know me."

"I kinda already knew, Spaghetti Man," Richie confesses, grinning. He taps his fingers against Eddie's arm twice before he removes it and picks his cutlery back up. "But it's okay; I'm a goner for you anyway."

Richie's never seen Eddie go *that* particular shade of pink before. He *loves it*.

"Shut up," Eddie mutters.

Eddie ducks his head like he hopes that'll mean Richie doesn't catch the hue of his face. Richie decides to go easy on the guy and allow a subject change.

"So," Richie announces loudly, cutting the tension as he shovels his last bite of pancakes into his mouth, chewing and swallowing before continuing his sentence. "I've shared some of my baggage, now you gotta lay some of yours on me too – why Psychology? I know there's more of an answer there than you just being interested." Richie sees the way Eddie's face immediately scrunches up into an anxious expression and wants to back-track instantaneously. "Oh, hey, shit, no – you don't have to if you don't want to. I was just trying to be funny and provocative – you know what I'm like. We'll talk about something else. So, uh. So this weather, huh? Pretty cold, ain't it?"

Eddie's face is still an anxious mess as Richie rambles. *God, Richie thinks. This actually could not be going any worse. He insults me, I insult him. It's just one big ol' revolving door of not going as I fucking planned!*

But then Eddie's shaking his head.

"No, it's fine," he says. "I don't usually talk about it, but that's just because I prefer not to even think about it." He pauses, inhales deeply and then exhales slowly, meeting Richie's eyes with a small smile when he's done. "The shitty family life I mentioned earlier? I was raised by my mom. My dad died when I was toddler, so I don't really remember him all that much. And my mom wasn't, *isn't*, a well woman. She's got Munchausen by proxy. Do you know it?"

Richie nods. "I've heard of it. That's when you convince the person in your care that they're sick, right?"

Eddie nods back. "Yeah, that's the one. I grew up thinking I was the sickest boy in the world. I felt like I was made of glass, like I had to be scared of everything. Like I'd die if I didn't do exactly as she said. She was so manipulative; crying when I disobeyed her, making me feel guilty if I ever left her to live my own life – even if it was just going to ride bikes with my friends for a couple of hours. I didn't find out it wasn't real until I was thirteen and the pharmacist's daughter told me that all my medicine – my pills, my inhaler, everything – that they were all just placebos. There was nothing wrong with me. There

never had been.”

“Fuck,” Richie whispers. “She sounds like a stand up kinda girl, that pharmacist’s daughter.”

Eddie snorts. “Oh, fuck, no. She was a bitch.” He shrugs. “But I suppose I do have to thank her. I mean – I’m still not great, with germs and ill people and like, I don’t know. Living my life properly, like not from inside a bubble? But I can only imagine how much worse I’d be if I’d never found out the truth. And learning about my mom’s sickness inspired me to help other people – so, yeah. Psychology.”

“So what did you do when you found out? Did you stay with her?”

“No.” Eddie shakes his head. “Bill’s family took me in. Told me I didn’t ever have to see her again if I didn’t want to.” He pauses. “I don’t. I haven’t. I hope I never have to again.”

“Sounds like it’s Bill who’s the stand up kinda guy, huh,” Richie offers, smiling supportively.

Eddie smiles fondly. “That he is. I can’t imagine my life without Bill in it. When we were applying for colleges, we initially considered going to different places, but it just felt *wrong*, you know? We’ve spent so much of our lives together, the thought of being away from him just did *not* work for me. Living with him is great.”

Richie starts to nod, is about to say he understands, he has that with Bev – but then it clicks.

*Oh, he thinks. I don’t have that with Bev. Eddie and Bill – they’re together.*

How did he not figure it out before? Bill is absolutely the kind of guy he can imagine Eddie to be with – tall, but not lanky like Richie, classically handsome, charming and kind above all else. Bill had been around on a few of the occasions where Richie had accosted Eddie in the halls of their building, and they were always leaning up against each other, clearly comfortable and familiar in each other’s personal space. Eddie has never responded positively to any of Richie’s flirting,

nor returned any of it in kind. Plus there's the fact that the apartments in their building have two rooms, and there's three people living in Eddie's place, so *obviously* Bill and Eddie are sharing a room.

He feels so *stupid*.

And heart-broken – but he'll ignore that part of it for as long as he can.

His face must show the five stages of grief it's going through, because Eddie tilts his head, gives him a confused look.

"You okay, Rich?" he asks, reaching out and placing his hand over Richie's. "Sorry if that was too much baggage. I know it's a pretty intense story to bring out over breakfast."

Richie shakes his head quickly. "Yeah, no, I'm fine," he says, squeezing Eddie's hand. "Thank you for telling me. Honest." Eddie smiles back, and he's looking at Richie a little curiously, fingers still twined between Richie's own. He looks like he's about to say something, or lean forward – or maybe that's just Richie projecting – but stops when Richie talks again, way too loud in the relative quiet of the diner. "Anyway, I got work in an hour, so I better get going. Lunch time shift. This one's on me, no arguing." He throws the cash on the table.

Eddie frowns. "I don't agree to that," Eddie says, moving his hand out of Richie's grasp in order to pick up the cash and slide it back over to Richie. "I want to pay for my half."

*Of course he does*, Richie thinks. *This isn't a date, idiot.*

"Honestly, Eds. I insist."

Eddie looks like he's about to protest again, so Richie just grabs their jackets and knitwear and drags Eddie out of the place, both of them offering a smile and a wave to the waitress as they leave.

"Okay, well. I'm getting it next time," Eddie says adamantly.

The sick feeling in Richie's stomach hasn't gone away since he first

realised that Eddie is not, in fact, available for Richie to have feelings for. But Eddie saying *next time* makes it feel a thousand times worse – he'd been hoping for a next time, but in a different sense.

“Yeah, sure. Next time.”

They walk back together towards the campus. Richie notices that Eddie keeps stealing little glances up at him, chewing on his bottom lip as they walk.

“Thanks, by the way,” Eddie comes out with eventually. “Sometimes I need to be forced out of my comfort zone.”

“What, eggs benedict is out of your comfort zone?” Richie teases. No matter how devastated he might be right now, knowing that Eddie's taken, it's still almost too easy to get along with him.

Eddie rolls his eyes, smiling. “You know what I mean. Just – just thank you for not quitting asking me to go eat with you. I've enjoyed my morning. Way more than I would've in class.”

“No problem, cu –” Richie starts, but cuts himself off before the word comes out. *You can't call him cutie anymore, dumbass. He's got a boyfriend.* He shakes his head, coming to a stop at a fork in the path, knowing this is where they walk separately. “No worries, man. I'll see you around, yeah?”

Eddie nods, biting his lip again – how they're not constantly torn to shreds is beyond Richie. As Richie is about to walk away, hand reaching into his pocket for his cell and earphones, he feels Eddie spin him back around with his hand on Richie's elbow.

“Hey, gimme your phone,” Eddie demands.

Richie snorts. “What, is this a stick up?”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “Just – just gimme the phone, Rich.” Richie hands it over with no further argument, tapping a number in and saving it under his own name. He hands it back once he's finished, and that blush of his is back on his face. “That's my number. If you ever wanted to hang out again or... or something.”

Richie feels weak. If this had been as he'd thought, if Eddie had been single – this would be his perfect ending to the morning. This would be his chance, where he'd absolutely agree to hang out again, over-eager, maybe even try and lean in for a quick cheek kiss, if Eddie allowed it.

But this isn't like he thought. Eddie isn't single. He's with Bill – perfect, loveable, *asshole* Bill.

“Yeah, sure thing, Eds,” Richie agrees, because he may not be able to have Eddie in the capacity he truly wants, but at this point, he likes Eddie so much he'll take anything and everything he can get – no matter how much he knows it's going to hurt him. “I'll text you, yeah?”

Eddie smiles, wide and unabashed. Richie wishes he could match that enthusiasm for their impending *friendship*.

“Yeah,” Eddie matches excitedly, waving as he begins to walk away. “See you later, Richie.”

“See you later,” Richie echoes, and puts his most depressing playlist in his ears for the walk to work.

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Bev, like always, is there for Richie when he comes home miserable from work.

“It's not *fair*, Bev!” he whines, head in her lap as she cards her fingers through his curls. He's only been home a total of ten minutes, but as soon as Bev caught his expression when he walked through the door, she'd immediately opened her arms up to him in a hug and demanded that he spill – so he did. “The first person I like, really, *truly* like, and he's got a boyfriend. A *long term* boyfriend. A boyfriend who's, like, better than me in every conceivable way.”

Bev *tsks*. “He's not better than you, Richie.”

Richie scoffs. "Tell that to Eddie."

She doesn't reply to that immediately, choosing instead to continue her hand's path through his hair whilst humming slightly under her breath. Richie closes his eyes and pushes his head up into her scratching fingers.

"I'll be honest with you, Rich: it does suck," she mumbles eventually. Richie hums his assent. "But, and as cliché as it is, there *are* other fish in the sea. This Eddie guy isn't the be all and end all of your dating life. I mean, honestly, you've known him for, what? Like a month?"

"Five weeks, actually."

"Five weeks ain't a lifetime, babe," she continues, moving her fingers from his hair to his cheek. "I'm sure someone else will come along who'll pique your interest, eventually."

Richie sits up at that; pressing himself against Bev's side and staring blankly ahead at their apartment wall. He bites his lip, debating whether to say what he's thinking; wondering if she'll think he's being dramatic (*like always*, he hears everyone he knows say in his head) or whether she'll understand that this time... this time, he's serious.

"I don't think you understand," he says, making his decision. "This wasn't – I wasn't – I've never." He pauses, inhales and exhales shakily. "I know I'm not in *love* with him or anything. I know we've not known each other long enough or well enough to be at that stage. But – but I know we would get there. I just *know*. He's funny, and I know he pretends *not* to find me funny, but he does, really. And we shared some weirdly personal shit earlier today that I – that I don't think I've ever said out loud to anyone but you before today."

"About your parents?" she asks, quiet and audibly surprised.

Richie nods. "And my ADHD. He told me stuff about his childhood, too, and I definitely got the impression that he's not usually big on sharing that kind of stuff." Richie bites his lip so hard, he feels the skin break. "But how could I compare to the guy who was actually there for him when it was all happening? His boyfriend – Bill –

they've been together practically since Kindergarten, I think. It's just – it's no contest. I'm a loser no matter which way you look at it."

"Oh, Rich," Bev whispers, taking his face in the palm of her hands and turning him so that they're nose to nose with each other, resting her forehead against his. "I hate that this is hurting you so much. I... I bet he's crappy in bed. Does that make you feel better?"

Richie snorts. "You wouldn't be saying that if you'd properly met him," he disagrees. "Dude's a little fucking firecracker. There's no way he ain't like that in bed, too. Big Bill's a lucky guy." Richie pauses, moving his head back into Bev's lap and scrunching his eyes closed like it might get rid of the thought that's just popped in to say 'fuck you'. "Fuck's *sake*, Bev. Eddie's nickname for his boyfriend is Big Bill. *Big*. And that's gotta be a reference to his crotch. Could this day get any fucking *worse*?"

"I'm sure it's not for crotch reasons, Rich," she says, rolling her eyes. "I've seen the guy you're talking about. He's tall."

"He's not as tall as me," Richie counters, chest puffing out. "Can you start calling me Big Dick around Eddie? Please?"

Bev gives him a strange look for that. "What do you mean, around him?" Her eyes narrow. "You're not going to keep hanging around with him, are you?" When Richie looks sheepishly at her, she continues, "Rich, baby, I don't think that's a good idea. Like, at *all*."

"I know, Bev."

"Like, you've got real *feelings* for this dude. And those feelings won't go away if you keep hanging around him. And – and this is gonna sound harsh, I know, but tough love has always been our thing: Eddie's boyfriend *isn't* going away. So your feelings have to."

"I'm not gonna be one of those friendzone guys, Bev," he reasons. "Like, I get it – I can't hit it, I can't date it. But we get along, and Eddie gave me his number earlier saying we should hang out again. I'm not gonna ghost him just because he doesn't want me the way I want him."

Bev frowns. “Okay, I get where you’re coming from. But I’m still not totally happy about this.”

“Bev, honey, neither am I. We’ll just have to suffer through this fucking mess together.”

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It’s not easy, that’s for fucking sure. Being around Eddie without actually getting to be *with* Eddie is like fucking torture. He honestly thinks for a little while that he’s died and this is his own personal hell; seeing Eddie’s smile without being allowed to even *try* kissing it is the kind of torment only the devil could think up.

It only gets worse when Bill is around – and that’s mostly because Richie finds that he actually genuinely likes Bill. He wishes he didn’t, but the guy’s just so damn *nice*, it’s impossible to actually hold a grudge against him. Richie does notice that he’s good to Eddie: asks how he is a lot, how his day was and so on. He lends Eddie his gloves when Eddie has forgotten his and is just truly and earnestly the kind of boyfriend Richie knows Eddie deserves in truth.

Richie knows he wouldn’t be that good of a boyfriend to Eddie.

Richie is all crudeness and *your mom* jokes, and Eddie deserves better than that. That knowledge still doesn’t make it any easier to live with.

He’s trying, honestly trying so hard to stop flirting with Eddie so much. He’s tried to stop grinning at him and teasing him, tried to stop acting the way he had been before he knew Eddie was taken. But it’s hard, and sometimes he catches himself failing. He’ll wrap an arm around Eddie’s shoulders without noticing, or pinch Eddie’s cheeks and call him cute before catching himself and moving away, ashamed.

Bill never seems to mind. He’s not pulled Richie aside yet and had *the talk*, the one where he tells Richie in no uncertain terms to *back the*

*fuck off*. Richie has no idea how he does it – if Eddie were Richie's, and some asshole was flirting with him the way Richie does, being as tactile with him as Richie is, well – well, there's not a chance in hell that Richie wouldn't have something to say about it.

It's just another reason to add onto the long list of why Bill is better for Eddie than Richie is, he supposes. He doesn't get jealous, is secure enough in himself that he knows Eddie can't, *won't*, do better. Richie knows he isn't better, but it still kind of hurts how little of a threat Bill sees him as.

They've even formed a weird little group, all of them together – Richie and Eddie are always present when the other is, Bill and Stan join often, Bev every now and then, Ben and his roommate Mike less frequently, but still on occasion. They all get along really well; it almost feels like they have been, or at least should have been, friends their entire lives. Richie's never had a big group of friends before in his life, it's been him and Bev against the world for the majority of their lives, but he finds that he honestly loves it.

Not quite as much as he loves spending time just him and Eddie, but it's pretty close.

Because that's what it is most of the time – him and Eddie. They go to breakfast together, lunch and dinner as well, sometimes all in the same day. They walk to classes together and Eddie comes into the bar Richie works in sometimes, orders fries and sits at the bar to keep Richie company. Richie loves spending time with Eddie, loves getting to make him laugh and roll his eyes and talk more about his personal life. He loves being Eddie's friend.

Unfortunately, though, he wound up being right in his previous assessment: he has also fallen *in* love with Eddie, just like he knew he would. Over the two months of knowing Eddie, he has fallen ass over heels in love, and it's honestly the most painful experience of his life – and that's bearing in mind the sixteen years he spent living with his abusive parents.

Richie never thought he'd know what love felt like, but when he looks at Eddie, he *knows*.

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It's a freezing cold Saturday in early December and the heating in Richie and Bev's apartment isn't switched on to save money. Bev is at Ben's – who works and can afford to actually use heating when it's intended to be used – so it's just Richie, sitting on the couch in two sweaters, a coat, and woollen mittens watching Netflix to pass the time.

It's a little before midday and he's considering ordering a pizza when there's a knock on the door. Richie huffs, horrified at the fact the puffed air is visible in front of him, damn winter, and pauses his show to go and answer it. Before he can reach the door, the knocking commences again, faster and harder this time.

"Jeez, I'm coming, I'm coming," Richie grumbles, not quickening his steps at all. "Keep your damn hair on."

He slides the door chain off and yanks the door open and finds Eddie on the other side, bundled in a too-big coat and a massive scarf, hands shoved inside his pockets and a deep scowl on his face. Richie is overwhelmed in that moment by just how fucking *cute* the little fucker looks.

"Took your damn time, Tozier," Eddie grumbles right back.

"Oh, Eddie," Richie breathes, deftly taking off his pink mittens and dropping them to the floor by his feet, hoping Eddie doesn't notice the action. He steps to the side and gestures an arm to welcome Eddie in. "Come in, man. You been somewhere cold?"

Eddie shakes his head. "Going," he answers, not stepping inside. "I'm gonna go for a walk by the lake in the park."

Richie balks at him. "In this weather? I thought you hated the cold."

"I do," Eddie says, shrugging. "But it looks pretty out, so."

“Fair enough,” Richie acquiesces. “Did you forget something here that you need for your travels?”

Eddie shakes his head again. “No, I was just coming by to see, uh. To see if you wanted to come with me? Maybe?”

“Oh,” Richie says, again. It’s not at all unusual for Eddie to drop by and ask Richie if he wants to hang out, or vice versa. But something about this time... it feels somehow different. “Who else is going?”

“No one else,” Eddie mumbles, and is he blushing? “I just thought it could be, I don’t know. Just the two of us?”

“*We can make it if we try,*” Richie sings back on instinct. Eddie does not look impressed, so Richie continues in his normal speaking voice. “Shit, uh, yeah, okay. Just let me grab my stuff.”

“What, you mean those pink mittens you threw off hoping I wouldn’t notice them?” Eddie teases.

“Aw, don’t worry, Eddie Spaghetti, I’ll let you wear ‘em if you ask real nice.” Eddie rolls his eyes while Richie bends to reclaim his mittens, following it by reaching for the hook by the door and grabbing his scarf and bobble hat. He winds the scarf around his neck and shoves the hat into his jacket pocket. “Let’s go then, my darling Edwin.”

They chat (bicker) their way out of building and onto the main road that leads to the park. It’s not long, a five minute walk at most, until they reach the entrance to the park. The grass is misted white above its green with iciness, the trees bare and the population in the park almost as bare. Eddie leads the way, taking the winding path that leads down to the small lake at the centre. Richie follows, happy to follow his Eddie to the end of the world, as much as that isn’t a good idea, and lets himself be grabbed by Eddie so that they’re sitting on a bench overlooking the water.

Richie hisses on contact. “Fuck *me*, that’s cold on my ass,” he complains, glaring at Eddie. “Why did you think it’d be a good idea to go outside in this climate?”

Eddie shrugs, not looking at him. "It's pretty."

And Richie's a clichéd mother fucker at heart, because without looking away from Eddie's face, he whispers, "Yeah, I guess you're right." They sit in companionable silence for a little while, both looking at how honestly breath-taking the lake looks in winter. After a little, Richie notices Eddie shivering. "Hey, you want my jacket?"

"No, Rich, you'll freeze," Eddie says, but Richie's already shrugging it off. "Richie, no! You'll catch hypothermia!"

"Pfft, I'll be fine, Eds! I'm a hot-blooded man, the cold can't get me." Eddie frowns at him warily, but allows the jacket to be draped over his shoulders. Richie is very, *very* cold now, in all honesty – but, hey, if anyone's worth it, right? "There's a hat in the pocket, too, if your ears get cold."

Eddie's hand immediately delves into the pocket, pulling out the grey material with a fluffy pom-pom on the top, but he doesn't put it on himself. Instead, he reaches over to Richie and pulls it over Richie's curls, squeezing the pom-pom and giggling when he's decided it's situated correctly.

"I won't be responsible for you getting sick just because you've given me all of your clothes," Eddie responds. "I'd never hear the fucking end of it from you."

"Trust me, Eds, I'd never complain about you taking my clothes off me." Eddie giggles again at that, cold doing nothing to hide the fact that, yeah, that colour to his cheeks is definitely brought on by a blush. "I take it you've deemed my jacket un-gross enough this time, then?"

Eddie gives him a confused look. "Huh?"

"When we first met," Richie explains. "You said, and I quote here: *I don't want your gross jacket, it's probably drenched in sweat and germs.* Remember?"

Eddie chuckles. "Yeah, I remember. *God*, I did honestly hate your guts that morning. You were exactly the kind of asshole I was not

looking to meet while I was in that mood.”

Richie grins. “And, yet, here we are. I sure do know how to win ‘em over, huh?”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, so quiet Richie barely catches it, almost to himself more than anything else. “I guess you do.”

It catches Richie off-guard; Eddie being earnest, being so earnestly *nice*. Eddie is honestly not as much of a dick as he thinks he is (or, at least, not *quite* as much) but he’s very rarely open with his affections, choosing instead to berate and tease with a cheeky smile. Even with Bill, Richie has noticed that Eddie won’t ever be openly loving.

That name – *Bill* – is like a douse of cold water to Richie’s heart.

“You shouldn’t have underestimated my winning charm, Eddie my boy,” Richie says, faking cheerfulness as he drags the conversation away from its previous tone. “It’s won over many a heart. That’s why there are so many notches on my bedpost. I’ll show you ‘em one day, if you’re lucky enough.”

Richie winks, expecting some witty, scathing retort from Eddie, but he doesn’t get one. Eddie just looks away, and Richie catches the look on his face before he does, and it looks – well, *jealous*, he’d say, if he didn’t know any better. It looks like Richie knows his own face does whenever Bill and Eddie hug, or even touch.

But Richie does know better, so he doesn’t let himself dwell on it. Too much.

They fall into yet another silence, this one not quite as companionable. It lasts a little longer than the previous one did, and Richie’s thoughts are absolutely in his *please do not go there* territory; namely, fixating on whether Eddie’s gaze *does* linger on him sometimes, whether Eddie *does* brush his hand against Richie’s on purpose on occasion, whether Eddie *did*, in fact, look jealous at the idea of Richie’s previous conquests.

He’s away with his thoughts and the fairies, and he doesn’t return to earth until he feels Eddie shove something cold and metal into his

hand.

“Here,” Eddie says, staring resolutely down at Richie’s hand instead of at his face. “You were fidgeting.”

“Is this,” Richie whispers, stomach swooping and eyes flickering between the contraption in his hand and the furious blush on Eddie’s face, “a fidget spinner? Did you buy this?”

“Yeah,” Eddie confirms, moving his gaze over to the lake. “I heard they were good for people with ADHD, so.”

“Heard?” Richie questions. “Heard from who?”

Eddie huffs an irritated breath through his nose. “Are we playing twenty questions or something?”

“Just answer the question, Eddie.”

“Jesus Christ, *fine*. I *maybe* did a *tiny* bit of research and google said that these were good for people who are restless because of ADHD.” Eddie starts his sentence off in an irritated tone, but continues in a softer one, biting his lip and finally looking Richie in the eye. “I know you don’t like it when people ask you about it, so. I thought this might help. If it doesn’t, or you’ve already got one, I can take it back, no big deal.”

He reaches over, trying to take it back from Richie’s still open palm. Richie responds by snapping his palm shut and shoving the mechanism into his jeans pocket.

“Nope, not a chance, cutie, it’s mine now, no take-backs.”

Eddie smiles, hands falling where they were: into Richie’s lap. “Okay.”

Richie smiles back. “Thank you,” he says genuinely, wrapping his hand around Eddie’s two. He ruins the moment mere seconds later by putting on his Southern Belle voice. “It’s real thoughtful of you, sugar, can’t believe you went to all this effort for li’l ol’ me.”

“It wasn’t that much effort,” Eddie replies, rolling his eyes. “They sell

them, like, everywhere. Don't go getting an inflated ego over this, Tozier." He pauses. "Wait, what am I saying; your ego literally could not be any more inflated than it already is."

Richie smirks. "Insult me all you want, Kaspbrak. I know now how much you really care."

They're still holding hands, Richie is faintly aware, and they're still staring into each other's eyes, Richie is acutely aware. It almost feels like time has stopped, like they're the only two people in the universe, and the world is waiting with bated breath to see just what happens next.

Eddie's eyes dart left and right, and then he's tugging at Richie to stand up. "C'mon," he urges, and Richie does, allowing Eddie to twine their fingers together and walk them so they're standing by a large tree trunk, tucked away on its lake-side, hidden from anyone who might still be wandering around the park. He positions them so that Richie is standing with his back to the tree, Eddie standing close in front of him – *very* close. "There's something I've been wanting to do."

"Yeah?" Richie doesn't know how he's talking when he barely feels like he can breathe. This feels like a moment Richie has fantasised about almost a million times. "What's that?"

"This," Eddie says simply, and he leans up on his tip-toes and presses his cold lips against Richie's.

Richie's response is instinctive. He immediately leans down, wrapping his arms around Eddie's waist and twisting them so that he can press Eddie against the tree. His mouth moves in tandem with Eddie's; soft, sweet kisses to begin with, mouths closed, little and often, moving into deeper kisses after a minute or two (Richie doesn't think time exists right now, so he's not really counting the seconds). Their mouths open together and soft, breathy noises escape both of their lips. Eddie's tongue is hot; a contrast to the iciness of his lips; a contrast to the bitter coldness of his hands as they sneak up and under Richie's sweaters.

Eddie's mouth and entire *being* is everything Richie had been

dreaming of and more, because *this* – this feels ethereal; other-worldly, like this is an angel in his arms, and, *fuck*, when the fuck did Richie get this fucking *sappy*?

Eddie's hands are desperately clutching at Richie's hair, and if Richie's glasses are getting in his way, he's not showing it; pressing up harder, *closer*, like he literally cannot get close enough.

"Richie," Eddie breathes, mouth free as Richie trails hot, sticky kisses along his jawline. "Fuck, *Richie*."

*I wonder if he's ever said Bill's name in such a beautiful way*, Richie thinks before he can stop himself – and that's what brings him back.

He pulls away from Eddie like he's been burnt and hates how he misses the contact instantly. Eddie blinks, tilting his head and reaching out to pull Richie back to him. Richie takes another step back so that he's out of Eddie's reach.

"Eds," he says, and his voice sounds *wrecked*. Eddie's mouth is puffy and red, swollen from the intensity of their kiss, and Richie has to look away. "Eds, *fuck*, no, I don't want –"

Eddie doesn't let him finish. "*Fuck*," he squeaks. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. I'm sorry, I – I –"

Eddie doesn't let himself finish, either, running away – literally *running* – before he finishes his sentence. Richie watches the guy pound dirt until he's a dot in the distance, and only then does he allow himself to move, banging his head a little too hard (definitely too hard) against the tree trunk. It's still kind of warm from where Eddie's body heat had been pressed against it not too long ago.

"Fuck," Richie mumbles, talking to himself. "Way to go, Trashmouth. I always knew you were a fuck-up, but I didn't know you were a home-wrecker, too." He pats himself on the back, eyes squeezed shut. "Way to fuckin' go, man."

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Richie and Eddie mutually avoid each other for two long days.

On Sunday, Richie catches sight of Eddie in the hallway as he's entering their apartment building. Eddie is at the top of the stairs, only noticing Richie out of the corner of his eye. But it's clear he does notice him, because he bolts away and into his apartment within seconds. Richie is honestly thankful.

On Monday, Richie skips the class the share. He skips all of his classes that day, actually. Bev tries to get him to talk to her about what's happened, but he refuses – there's no chance he's admitting to her what he did. He's just too ashamed to be able to say it out loud, even though it's eating him up inside. He stays inside his bedroom all day, wallowing, and his phone doesn't chime once with a text from Eddie asking where he's been all day.

On Tuesday, Richie has a lunchtime shift at the bar that he drags himself out of bed for. He would have been content – *more* than content – to spend today avoiding Eddie again, but that plan is thwarted when Eddie walks in about an hour into his shift. Richie always works Tuesday lunches, so Eddie must have known Richie would be there. It's not like a guy like Eddie would frequent a dive bar like this for any other reason.

Richie, being the childish idiot he is, quickly squats down behind the bar, like maybe Eddie wouldn't have seen him. Richie, being the childish idiot he is, ignores the fact that they'd actually made eye contact when Eddie walked through the door.

"Richie," he hears Eddie say, softer than usual but still exasperated. "I saw you."

"Who's Richie?" Richie responds, cringing at himself immediately.

Eddie huffs. "Richie, can you maybe please stop being a fucking idiot for like *two seconds*," Eddie implores, muttering under his breath, "I swear to God."

Richie thinks it over for a second or two, and then slowly stands up

behind the bar.

“Oh, hey, Eds, I didn’t see you there.”

Eddie levels him with a scathing look. “Look, I know this is awkward,” he says, cutting right to the fucking chase, “but we need to talk about this.”

“But I don’t want to,” Richie tries.

“Well, neither do I, but we’re fucking going to, okay?”

Richie bites his lip, but he nods. “Yeah, okay.” Eddie gingerly takes a seat at one of the stools on the bar. Richie is instinctively reminded of Eddie’s first visit here, when he complained about everything surrounding him being filthy, but still didn’t leave. “I – I do want to say that I’m sorry.”

“No, no. You – you’ve got nothing to be sorry for. It’s not your fault.” Richie wants to protest, say that he absolutely is in the wrong – they both are, for doing this to Bill; lovely, sweet Bill – but Eddie continues before he can. “I’m sorry. I – I guess I read the signals wrong.”

*You didn’t read anything wrong, Richie wants to say. I just shouldn’t have been sending out those signals. You’re with Bill and I won’t ruin that. You don’t want to ruin that, really, not for a guy like me.*

Instead, he shrugs, and says aloud; “I still don’t feel great about it.”

“Me neither,” Eddie mumbles, picking at the beer mat on the sticky bar. Richie reaches for a dishcloth and cleans the area around Eddie’s elbows to make him more at ease. Eddie offers him a small smile of thanks when he’s done. “But we can still be friends, right? I don’t want to lose your friendship.”

Even though it hurts, that’s what Richie wants, too – it’s been his second-best choice the whole time.

“Yeah, man,” he agrees. “Of course. We’re still bros. And – and don’t worry. I won’t tell Bill.”

Eddie gives him a weird look for that – *guilt*, Richie thinks.

“Oh, uh. Okay – thanks?”

Richie pats Eddie on the shoulder. “No problem, buddy.” Okay, so maybe he’s going a little overkill with the pally nicknames, but he’s trying to get a point across to his own damn brain that keeps flashing back to the feeling of Eddie’s mouth against his own, Eddie’s hands fisted in his hair. He coughs into his fist to break himself out of the thoughts. “So, uh. Can I get you anything while you’re here?”

“No, thank you,” Eddie replies, shaking his head and standing up from the stool. “I’m actually meeting Big Bill for lunch in like twenty minutes.” Richie ignores the way his heart clenches at how casually Eddie mentions Bill, even using that *fucking* nickname. “I just wanted to come by and sort this out. Oh, and to also ask – are you free on Saturday?”

“Oh, um, yeah, I am. Why?”

“It’s Bill’s birthday. We’re throwing a party for him at our place on Saturday night. Did you – did you want to come?” Richie is astounded at the idea that Eddie would *want* him there, after everything, so he doesn’t respond immediately. “I mean, obviously if it’s still too weird for you then we can hold off hanging out again for a little while.”

“Do,” Richie starts, almost deciding against asking but resolving to steam ahead anyway, “do you really want me there?”

Eddie smiles at him. A soft, sweet, sad looking smile.

“Yeah,” he says. “I do. I mean – we’re still friends, right? So it – it’ll be fine. I’ll get over it.”

Richie knows what that means: *I’ll get over you, Richie, and continue living my wonderful life with my perfect boyfriend, and you’ll just be a blip on my radar, a mistake I never should have made and will forget about so fast it’ll make your head spin.*

Whilst it hurts to know Eddie will think of their kiss like this, he also knows it’s for the best – for Eddie, at least. Eddie will get over it, and

Richie; Richie will try.

“Yeah, okay, sure. I’ll be there. See you around, Eds.”

Richie watches as Eddie leaves to go meet Bill and he can almost see the shattered pieces of his heart underneath Eddie Kaspbrak’s shoes as he walks.

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It takes a lot of convincing, but Richie eventually manages to persuade Bev to come with him to Bill’s party instead of going on her usual date night with Ben – mostly because Ben and Mike agree to come to Bill’s party with them. She still doesn’t know exactly why Richie has been moping all week – more so than usual, anyway – but she is right in assuming it is Eddie related. Richie does confirm this for her when she asks, but he doesn’t offer anything more specific and, bless her heart, she doesn’t ask. She’s always been able to tell when Richie is ready to talk about something, and she knows that right now, he definitely isn’t.

Richie hasn’t seen Eddie since that lunchtime on Tuesday, but Stan had dropped by their place yesterday to let them know the party starts at seven. Bev and Richie show up at a quarter past eight; half due to Richie being extraordinarily anxious about being alone with Bill and Eddie at any point and half due to Richie fussing over his appearance for an hour longer than usual, still weirdly concerned with how he looks when he’s around Eddie.

When they do show up, the party is in full swing. Music blasting, alcohol flowing, people already getting a grind on in the middle of the make-shift dance floor. Normally, Richie would be joining in the festivities immediately, but tonight, he’s just not feeling it.

Of course, Bev notices this immediately – the girl knows him just too damn well.

“Not up for a boogie yet, Rich?” she asks.

Richie shrugs. “Nah, not yet. Need some booze in me first.”

“I-I’ll drink to th-th-that,” Bill says, suddenly coming up beside Richie and thrusting a red solo cup into his hand. He’s grinning, clearly already at least halfway to drunk. Stan stands behind him, looking nervously around, like he’s really not comfortable with the sheer number of people in their apartment. “Th-thanks for coming!”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world, Billiam,” Bev answers, leaning in to give Bill a hug. “Happy Birthday!”

“You t-t-too!” Bill says, then pauses, a confused look passing over his face. “Wait a second.” He turns to face Stan. “I think I’ve h-had a little t-t-too much, Stan.”

“You think?” Stan retorts, snorting. “I think that’s your fifth double of the night already.”

“I-it’s Eddie’s fault,” Bill says, turning to Bev and Richie in order to explain. “H-h-he keeps putting fr-fresh ones in my h-hand. H-hey, where is Eddie?”

At that, Richie downs his drink in one go. “Oh, look, my cup’s empty. Gotta go get some more, ha. Catch you guys later.”

He runs off before Bev can give him another of her looks, but unfortunately, runs straight into Eddie.

Like, literally straight into him, meaning the cup of liquid that had been in Eddie’s hands sloshes all over his t-shirt. Eddie first looks down at the mess of his top, then up with a look of pure rage on his face, but it morphs into something else when he sees who the culprit is.

“Richie,” Eddie breathes, and *fuck*, does he really have to say Richie’s name *just like that*, just like he did when they – they – Richie shuts the thought down before it can fully form. “You came.”

“I said I was going to, Eds,” Richie offers, taking the tissues a concerned passer-by hands him and giving them over to Eddie. “Sorry about your shirt. I didn’t see you there.”

"It's fine," Eddie says, which isn't very like him, but Eddie seems a little tipsy already, so maybe he's kinder, more forgiving, when he's drunk. "It's only vodka soda. It'll dry."

Eddie is staring at Richie in a really weird way, almost like he's happy to see him, but doesn't want to be. Richie can get that – having the guy you cheated on your boyfriend with *at* said boyfriend's party must be a hell of an anxious time for anyone.

"I'm just going to get another drink," Richie says, about to follow it with, *so I'll catch you later*.

But then Eddie pipes up with, "Oh, cool. I'll come with. Seeing as you've just giving me an involuntary body shot with mine."

Thinking of Eddie and body shots – Richie has to close his eyes and vigorously shake his head before he can start picturing it too hard.

Richie walks over to the table where the alcohol is all laid out, Eddie hot on his heels. Eddie is babbling a little bit, talking about what a good turnout it is, how Bill is so popular because of how freaking nice he is. Richie doesn't say anything, but he kind of wants Eddie to shut up reminding him just how fucking nice Bill is. Richie is already feeling enough guilt as it is; anymore and he's going to be physically sick.

Eddie pours himself another vodka soda when they reach the drinks table, and Richie pulls a bottle of beer from the cooler, taking a long pull as soon as the cap is off. Eddie quietens down a little, presumably at Richie's lack of responses beyond the occasion hum of assent. Eddie is frowning at him as he sips incessantly from his cup, finishing it way too fast and then going to pour himself another one.

"Whoa, Eds," Richie interjects, hand wrapping around Eddie's wrist. "Don't you think you should slow down a little? The night's still young, you don't wanna be blowing chunks before they've even brought the cake out, do ya?"

Eddie huffs, but does reach for a water bottle instead.

"You're being weird with me," Eddie says, direct. "Would you even

care if I did get too drunk and had to go to bed early?"

Yes, Richie thinks instantly.

"Bill would care," he answers. "It's his birthday, man. You can't *not* be here for his whole birthday. He's your –"

Halfway through Richie's sentence, some asshole knocks into Eddie from behind, making Eddie spill water all over himself, effectively cutting Richie off.

"Oh, come *on*," Eddie yells, whirling around to face the drunk guy. "Watch where you're fucking going, dipshit!"

*Okay, so maybe not as forgiving when drunk as initially thought.*

He takes Eddie's distraction as an opportunity to slip away and out of this awkward and painful conversation, walking onto the balcony where he can see a few other smokers, Bev included. Richie gave up smoking nearly two years ago, save for the odd one on special occasions – and tonight definitely feels like one of those nights.

"One of those nights?" Bev echoes aloud unknowingly.

Richie nods. "One of those fucking nights, Miss Marsh."

She wraps an arm around his waist as the party goes on behind them. Richie can still kind of hear Eddie shouting at the dude who knocked him, and he has to fight back a smile.

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If Richie thought the alcohol was flowing freely before, he's astounded with the level it's at now. Everyone is *wrecked*, the grinding on the dance floor taking it up a damn notch from earlier, at this point being nearly pornographic. Bev and Ben are probably the worst offenders as they press against each other, but Mike and his girlfriend aren't far behind. The music is, for the most part, a lot of

down and dirty R&B stuff, which Richie would usually be *very* into it – but he's still not feeling it. Shocking, considering the situation, he knows.

Bill has been friendly towards Richie all night, keeping his hand filled with a beer bottle whenever he sees it empty. Richie always mutters a quick thanks before darting off as fast as he can. Talking to Bill makes Richie feel like the worst human being in the entire world, but the look Bill gives him whenever he dodges him, like he just doesn't understand – it makes Richie feel even worse.

Eddie hasn't tried speaking to Richie again since Richie ducked him earlier, but he does scowl at Richie whenever he catches Richie's eye.

So – yeah, the night's going swell, thanks for asking!

A sudden change in genre fills Richie's ears.

He says: “Is this *Let's Hear It For The fuckin' Boy?*”

At the same time Eddie says: “Holy *shit*, this is my fucking song!”

Eddie is grinning widely, tipsily as he yanks Bill onto the dance floor. They begin dancing together – terribly, Richie notes – and screeching the words at one another. It's so ridiculous, but it's also ridiculously *sweet*, so Richie leaves the room and goes to sit on the couch with Stan.

“I fuckin' hate this song,” Stan says, slurring a little and looking more comfortable than earlier. He's clearly taken a leaf out of Bill's book for tonight. “Eddie is *obsessed* with it. Bill must've snuck it onto the playlist for him without me noticing.”

The omnipresent sick feeling in Richie's stomach swells.

“Must be tough for you,” Richie says.

“Wha' must be tough for me?” Stan slurs, taking a drink from his cup.

“Living with those two,” Richie clarifies.

“Huh?” Stan turns to Richie then, giving him a weird look. “You

don't like Bill and Eddie? You don't like *Eddie*?"

Richie splutters. "What the fuck, man? Of course I like them!" *I like one of them way too fucking much.* "Why the fuck d'ya think I don't like them?"

"You just said it must be tough living with them!"

"Yeah, but I meant, like," Richie begins to explain, "it must be tough being a third wheel in your own home, is all. Of course I like them, jeez, Stanley."

Stan's weird look intensifies. "What the ever-loving-fuck are you talking about, Tozier?"

"I think you're drunk, Uris."

"I may be drunk but you're not making any sense. Why the fuck would I be a third wheel?" Stan narrows his eyes, considering. "What, because they've known each other longer than they've known me?"

Richie rolls his eyes. "You must be really wasted, Stan the Man. I mean because they're dating."

Stan blinks.

Stan blinks again.

Stan blinks an almost unnatural amount of times.

"They're doing what now?" he asks, eventually.

Richie shuffles, uncomfortable. "They're dating."

"Uh, nope. Not unless I missed a *major* development in the last ten minutes since I saw Bill sticking his tongue down that girl from his writing class's throat."

Richie feels like he's hyperventilating. Oh, wait, no – he actually *is* hyperventilating.

“*What?*” he squeaks. “They’re – they’re not dating? Eddie *isn’t* dating Bill? Bill *isn’t* Eddie’s boyfriend? Do *not* fuck with me right now, Uris!”

“I’m not fucking with you!” Stan asserts, and then his eyes go wide. “Oh shit, is *this* why you blew Eddie off when he kissed you last week?”

“Of course it fucking is!” Richie yells, standing up and grabbing at fistfuls of his hair. “What other fucking reason could I have to blow him off! I’m obsessed with him! We all know this!”

Stan cackles. “Yeah, well, we were all pretty confused. Eddie most of all.”

Richie’s hands fall to his sides. “Eddie,” he breathes, eyes scanning the room for a sign of the guy. “Stan, help me find Eddie, I gotta find Eddie!”

“He’s over there,” Stan says, pointing to where Bill and Eddie stand in the kitchen, a girl tucked against Bill’s side. Why the *fuck* couldn’t Bill have kissed a girl in front of Richie two months ago! “Go get ‘im, tiger.” He pauses, considering his words. “Man, I think I’ve accidentally gotten to Bill’s level.”

Richie hasn’t got *time* for Stan’s drunken introspection right now, choosing to instead stride across the room until he’s joined Eddie, Bill, and this random girl’s group. Eddie turns to glare at Richie, still looking a little tipsy, but nothing overboard, about the same level Richie’s at.

“The fuck do you want?” Eddie asks, folding his arms over his chest.

“Eddie, I swear, how ma-many times d-d-do I have to tell you; s-stop being r-rude!”

“No, it’s fine, Big Bill,” Richie interjects, able now to say the nickname with a smile. “I deserve it.” Eddie smiles smugly at Bill before turning his scowl back on Richie. Richie could not care less right now; grinning like an insane person as he is. “You’re not dating Bill, Eds!”

Everyone in the vicinity who hears Richie's, admittedly pretty loud, declaration turns to give him weird looks that mirror Stan's. Bill and Eddie's are the weirdest of them all.

"I know?" Eddie says, slowly. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Realisation clearly hits Eddie like a freight train; it shows on his face. "Wait, hold the fuck up – you thought I was *dating Bill* but still *kissed you*? What the *fuck* kind of person do you think I *am*?"

"You k-kissed Eddie even though y-you thought I was d-dating him?" Bill asks, sounding acutely offended. "Wh-what the fuck, man? I thought we were friends?"

"Shut up, Big Bill, this is my time to be offended." Eddie points a finger at Richie's chest menacingly. "Tell me, right this fucking second, what the *fuck* ever gave you the impression I was dating Bill?"

Richie laughs sheepishly, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I don't know, you're just – you're super affectionate with each other."

"You're affectionate with Beverly," Eddie counters.

"You came to college with him because you didn't want to be apart."

"*You* did that with *Beverley*."

"You live in a two bedroom apartment with three people!"

"There's *three bedrooms*." Eddie points left, middle, and right. "Three bedrooms. Three people. Who the *fuck* assumes dating before asking, oh, hey, Eddie, how many bedrooms does your place have?"

"How the *fuck* do you ask how many bedrooms someone's apartment has without sounding like a total fucking creeper?"

"*Richie*, the other day you asked me what kind of underwear I wear when I sleep! How the *fuck* is asking about bedrooms creepier than *that*?"

"Well, why weren't you confused when I said I wouldn't tell Bill about us kissing?"

“I was confused! Did you not see how confused I was?”

“I thought it was guilt!”

“Of course it wasn’t fucking guilt! It was confusion, you fucking weirdo!”

“You call him Big Bill!” Richie blurts – and he hadn’t meant to reveal that one.

Eddie’s agitated expressions turns back into a confused one. “Yeah? So?”

“He thought you were talking about his dick,” Bev says, and Richie hadn’t even realised she’d joined the group watching this scene unfold. Richie really wishes she hadn’t, after that. “He’s been feeling very inferior about it all.”

“Marsh, honestly, I am *begging* you to shut up.”

Bill grins. “I f-forgive you for k-kissing my boyfriend, Richie.”

“Not your boyfriend!” Richie and Eddie yell in unison.

“Of course I wasn’t talking about his *dick*, moron,” Eddie snaps, but he’s smiling now, really grinning, edging closer to Richie. “It’s a nickname from when we were kids, you sick pervert!”

“Well, how the fuck was I supposed to know that?” Richie snaps back, but he’s mirroring Eddie’s smile and steps closer. “For all I know, you could be dating the best hung guy in the *world*. What kinda fucking chance could I stand against that?”

“Well, maybe it wouldn’t fucking matter.” Eddie arms are around Richie’s neck at this point, the tips of their noses brushing each other; they’re so close. Richie winds his arms around Eddie’s waist and lifts him, ever so slightly, so that Eddie’s feet are just barely off the ground. “Maybe I want to date you and your weird, tiny dick.”

“Hey, you can’t talk that way about my dick; you haven’t even seen it yet!”

Eddie's tongue is caught between his teeth, smiling shamelessly around it. "Maybe we should rectify that. Like, right now."

"Which one are you – left, middle, or right?" Richie asks, picking Eddie up fully, Eddie laughing loudly as he wraps his legs around Richie's waist. "D'ya know what, it doesn't fucking matter, we'll use the closest one."

"Don't you fucking dare!" Richie hears Stan call out.

Eddie giggles against Richie's lips as the door slams behind them, and Richie has never felt happier in his entire life.

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## SIX MONTHS LATER

*I'm going to quit my fucking job*, Richie thinks, not anywhere near for the first time, as he opens the door to his apartment. The digital clock on the oven blinks **03:23** at him as he places his keys into the pot and hangs his jacket up on the hook behind the door. As he's toeing off his shoes, quiet as he can, he hears mumbling coming from the couch.

"Rich?" he hears his name murmured. "That you?"

"Yeah, baby, it's me," Richie coos – *literally* coos – as he moves to the couch and takes a seat beside the bundle of blankets containing one sleepy looking Eddie Kaspbrak. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"No, s'fine, I meant to stay up for you anyway." Eddie yawns, preening slightly when Richie places a kiss against his cheek, preening even more when Richie pulls Eddie flush against his side. "Bev's at Ben's tonight but she kept me company for a few hours. You hungry?"

Richie shrugs – he’s not starving, seeing as how he and Eddie had dinner together just before he went off to work. But he’s never been one to say no to food.

“I could eat,” he concedes. “But I’ll make something, baby, don’t get up.”

Eddie shakes his head. “No, there’s a sandwich in the fridge for you. I made it earlier.”

Richie stares down at his boyfriend. His gorgeous, tiny ball of fury boyfriend, and just feels so much *love* in his heart, it feels like it might burst.

Over the six months they’ve been dating – ever since that fateful night that Stan’s never let them say sorry enough for – Richie has fallen so disgustingly in love, it makes the feelings he had previously pale in comparison. He and Eddie are inseparable, constantly touching and kissing and being so gross with their PDA that their friends have threatened to quit hanging out with them on numerous occasions – but they’re all happy for them, really.

Richie truly never thought he’d have this. He thought for too long that he’d never be able to have this with his Eddie, that now he’s got it – Eddie sleeping on the couch waiting up for him, Eddie making him food to come home to, Eddie sleepily and happily accepting his kisses – he feels almost overwhelmed with how fucking lucky he is.

“Thank you,” Richie says, pressing a soft kiss against Eddie’s sleepy, pliant lips. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Eddie says, snuggling his head back into the crook of Richie’s neck. “Anything to stop you almost burning the building down again.”

*Worth it*, Richie thinks.